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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KISL](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: THE AMBASSADOR'S DINNER WITH PROMINENT SHI'A
CLERIC BAHR AL-ULOOM

Classified by Robert Ford, Minister Counselor for Political
Affairs for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: A prominent Shi'a cleric told the Ambassador August 13 that Iraqis perceive significant security improvements, but stressed that regional engagement against foreign fighters would be key to sustaining this progress. Sayyed Mohammed Bahr al-Uloom and his two sons, politicians in their own right, also expressed support for the completion of a strategic framework agreement. The Bahr al-Ulooms were less upbeat about the performance of the Maliki government, and believed ordinary Iraqis were becoming alienated and skeptical of the GOI. They pleaded for U.S. support to enfranchise a silent majority of Iraqi "independents" who shunned sectarianism and partisanship. Bahr al-Uloom expressed confidence that Shi'a radical Muqtada al-Sadr and his militias were fizzling out, but warned that unless unemployment and the government services deficit were not improved, Sadrists or similar movements would reemerge to destabilize Iraq. End summary.

¶2. (C) On the evening of August 13, Sayyed Mohammed Bahr al-Uloom, a prominent (and moderate) Shi'a cleric and former member of the CPA-era Iraqi Governing Council, hosted Ambassador Crocker for dinner at his Baghdad residence. His sons, Former Minister of Oil Ibrahim Bahr al-Uloom, and Mohammed Hussein Bahr al-Uloom, and his grandson Hashem Bahr al-Uloom, also joined the dinner. PolMinCouns, Special Assistant Khedery, and poloff (notetaker) also attended.

A Tangibly Improved Security Situation

¶3. (C) During an August 13 dinner, prominent Shi'a cleric Sayyed Mohammed Bahr al-Uloom told the Ambassador that Iraqis are now feeling the benefits of an improved security situation. As an example he noted recently seeing thousands of Iraqis enjoying late night picnics in public areas in central Baghdad. He thanked the Ambassador for MNF-I's major contributions to improved security, expressed confidence in the growing capacity of Iraqi Security Forces, and expressed hope that the upcoming Shaabaniya Shi'a religious holiday would pass peacefully.

Regional Engagement is Key to Sustained Security

¶4. (C) Bahr al-Uloom blamed foreign fighters for the majority of terrorist acts occurring in the country. He regretted that the Iraqi Governing Council, on which he served during the CPA era, and subsequent Iraqi governments, had failed to effectively engage Iraq's Arab neighbors to resolve the problem of foreign fighter infiltration. The Ambassador noted that the U.S. had been working hard to persuade Arab allies to dispatch ambassadors to Baghdad and expressed hope

that Baghdad would soon see the arrival of envoys from Jordan, Kuwait, and the UAE, and a team from the Egyptian MFA to conduct a security survey.

15. (C) Ibrahim Bahr al-Uloom, a former Minister of Oil in Ibrahim Jaafari's government, welcomed this progress but underlined that most Arab governments would follow Saudi Arabia's lead, noting that Riyadh had yet to name an ambassador to Baghdad. Amb. Crocker agreed that the KSA was key, but saw potential progress there as well, opining that the recent visit of Lebanese/Saudi politician Saad al-Harriri to Najaf, and his call on Ayatollah Sistani, was an important, if indirect, signal from Riyadh. The biggest problems are Syria and Iraq, the Ambassador noted, observing that Damascus and Teheran appear to coordinate policy on Iraq as they coordinate policy on Lebanon.

Supporting a Strategic Framework Agreement

16. (C) Bahr al-Uloom and his sons expressed support for the completion of a Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) that serves the interests of both sides. "Iraq and the U.S. are not just countries that have relations, we are strategic partners," Ibrahim al-Uloom stressed. A well-crafted SFA will improve Iraq's security situation on both the internal and external fronts, they opined. Bahr al-Uloom thought an initiative to educate and sensitize the Iraqi public on the need for an SFA would be a key to success.

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Enfranchise the "Independents"

17. (C) While upbeat about improving security and U.S. - Iraqi ties, Bahr al-Uloom and his sons were downcast about the state of the GOI and its relationship with the Iraqi public. Political party elites and sectarian leaders were pursuing personal agendas, not the public interest, Bahr al-Uloom lamented. This view is widely held in the Shi'a community, he asserted, recalling that Grand Ayatollah Sistani, in a conversation earlier in the spring, had told him that Iraqi parliament members were not representing the people, but were preoccupied with their own salaries and perquisites.

18. (C) Ibrahim Bahr al-Uloom, the former Minister of Oil, gave an impassioned plea for U.S. support for Iraq's "political independents," a silent majority of Iraqis with moderate inclinations, unaffiliated with existing parties or blocs and currently unrepresented in the Iraqi government. "The U.S. has a duty to support these independents, and help them organize and take their rightful place," he exclaimed. Ambassador Crocker said that the USG welcomed engagement with independents and others Iraqis seeking to engage peacefully in public life, but stressed that such groups should not just wait passively for the U.S. to approach them with offers of assistance.

19. (SBU) Bahr al-Uloom and sons told the Ambassador they were leading the development of a new Institute for Political Science and Strategic Studies in Najaf. The Institute would be the first of its kind in Iraq and would produce graduates fluent in the language of political science and international diplomacy, ready to help Iraq play a larger role in the international community and integrate into the global economy, and plant the seeds for the emergence of an enlightened Iraqi society. President Talabani himself laid the cornerstone for the project earlier this year and pledged USD 1 million toward its construction. The Bahr al-Ulooms hoped that the USG would also support the project.

"Beginning of the End" for Muqtada al-Sadr

¶10. (C) Staunch enemies of Sadrist trend, Sayyed Bahr al-Uloom ridiculed Muqtada al-Sadr's latest call for Iraqis to sign with blood a pledge to resist "occupiers" and "invaders." "This is the beginning of the end for Muqtada al-Sadr," Bahr al-Uloom pronounced confidently. The GOI's operation in the spring to wrest control of Sadr City back from Sadrist militias had been a turning point. While Bahr al-Uloom and his sons saw Sadr and his militias as essentially neutralized, they warned that the problem would return, and would be worse, unless the GOI, with U.S. support, acted decisively to address the government services deficit and the massive problem of youth unemployment. The Ambassador agreed and underlined that the U.S. was urging faster action on the part of Iraqi authorities.

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